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## Deprivation and Overload: Bruce Nauman's Body of Art

In 1967, after a couple of apprenticeship years as a sculptor using polyester resin, fiberglass and similar kinds of materials, Bruce Nauman comes up with a completely new type of work – a spiral neon sign proclaiming “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths”.<sup>1</sup> What can one do with such a sentence? On the one hand, it is quite ridiculous, a mockery of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “religion of art” and all that goes with it, both aesthetically and socially. On the other, the artist who is serious about what he does (which may just as well include self-deprecating or self-mocking gestures) has somehow to believe in it, because there is no point in being an artist if one does not feel that art can be of import for the lives of other people. Therefore a sentence as the above puts the mind on edge – it simultaneously is and is not true.<sup>2</sup> It also sparks off a potentially infinite series of questions:

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<sup>1</sup> The work did not come out of nowhere, it is related to a couple of other works Nauman had done the previous year. One of them is a transparent rose-coloured Mylar window or wall shade bearing the inscription “The true artist is an amazing luminous fountain”.

<sup>2</sup> Nauman quoted in Robert Storr, “Beyond Words”, in: *Bruce Nauman* [Exhibition Catalogue and Catalogue Raisonné], ed. Joan Simon (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994), p. 62.

If such a statement about the role of the artist is absurd, what does it mean to be an artist? If he does not reveal mystic truths, what is he supposed to do? And so on, and so forth. In fact, the attempts to answer them spawned most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art. But, if we, for a moment, stay with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which, in spite of all later disclaimers, indelibly marked all the subsequent western European attitudes to artistic production, we can safely say that the traditional answer here would be: the artist (or rather genius, because only he is the worthwhile artist) is supposed to **express individually**. Expression is revelation of mystic truths, but at the same time, and paradoxically, it is also a **self-revelation** in the unique mode of a particular genius. In other words, *The True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain*, which is the leading motive of a number of Nauman's works accomplished around the same time, one of them being the photograph which presents him squatting in the bushes in the overgrown backyard garden spurting a jet of water from his mouth (entitled *The Artist as a Fountain*). The photograph is black-and-white and "plain" (there are no "aesthetic effects", like special lighting or filters, involved), as if it had been taken by an amateur accidentally, which makes for a much stronger statement than its more famous and much reproduced colour twin *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (prettier and "technically refined"). Squatting in the bushes is an obvious obscene reference in the context of artistic "fountainism": art as self-revelation may be understood as indecent exposure, which may oscillate between the artist's narcissistic self-presentation (*Self-Portrait as a Fountain* as a pretty artistic object) and the public's forced intrusion in the backyard at the moment of taking a shit (*The Artist as a Fountain*). Yet, whatever the artist's or public's motives are, self-exposure, being obscene, is at the same time also **cruel**, even if self-inflicted.<sup>3</sup> As Nauman will say in one

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<sup>3</sup> The way watching pornography is always degrading - primarily for the "object" and only secondarily for the watcher as the witness to such degradation.

of his most important works of the 1970s: "People die of exposure".<sup>4</sup>

We arrive here at a particularly sensitive spot of artistic creation: self-exposure is painful and should be avoided (the true artist is **not** an amazing luminous fountain), but impersonal professional "production" is an equally bad solution (the true artist **does** help the world by revealing mystic truths). The question raised in this context seems to be: can an artist's work be **personal** without becoming **narcissistic**? And how to accomplish that? Can expression be divorced from self-revelation? And by what means?

For Nauman, the (tentative) answers to such questions will come out of the works done about the same time as the ones discussed above. That which links them together is their relation to the artist's body – what can be more personal than one's own physicality? But the body is meant here neither in a humanist sense with its symbolic set of meanings and functions, nor its phenomenological constitution that is a first step to humanist self-definition, and especially not in its anatomical and medical make-up depersonalising it into a mechanism perpetuating its own rules.<sup>5</sup> One has to avoid the practices of all these discourses in order to use one's body personally, yet not obscenely. Nauman approaches this task in two ways. Firstly, he tries to desymbolise the body by means of **abstracting** it (sometimes with large amounts of auto-irony added to that). The body might be rendered abstract by means of **deprivation**, as in *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals* (1966) where the templates remain the abstracted sign of the absent body of the disappeared model-author, or its personal signifiers may undergo the process of **overloading**, as in *My Last Name Exaggerated Four-*

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<sup>4</sup> *Consummate Mask of Rock* (1975). All of the motifs mentioned here: narcissism, exposure, cruelty, even defecation will unexpectedly (?) resurface after twenty years in a completely different context in a very violent work entitled *Clown Torture*.

<sup>5</sup> Coosje van Bruggen, "Sounddance", in: Bruce Nauman, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 44.

*teen Times Vertically* (1967) where the exaggeration makes it impossible to read the name, so turns it into an abstract pattern.<sup>6</sup> However, such technique stays basically on the negative side of "artistic subject critique" without presenting anything positively personal that would go with it.

An "affirmative" procedure, which will feature strongly in Nauman's work, grew out of the questions we began with that Nauman started to ask himself at the beginning of his career in his empty San Francisco studio:

The first real change came after I had a studio. I was working very little, teaching a class one night a week, and I didn't know what to do with all that time. I think that's when I did the first casts of my body and the name parts and things like that. There was nothing in the studio because I didn't have much money for materials. So I was forced to examine myself, and what I was doing there.<sup>7</sup>

And what he was doing was pacing a lot, drinking coffee and performing other ordinary activities, which slowly started becoming the subjects of his work. We witness here another ironic edge of a statement that simultaneously is and is not true: art is what an artist does in his studio. More or less ordinary simple activities are turned into Nauman's works, which were originally intended as performances, but ended up being films (and later videos) made in the artist's studio.<sup>8</sup> Performances presented in *Bouncing*

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Goodman, "From Hand to Mouth to Paper to Art: The Problems of Bruce Nauman's Drawings", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Willoughby Sharp, "Two Interviews", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> "When I was living in San Francisco, I had several performance pieces which no museum or gallery was interested in presenting. I could have rented a hall, but I didn't want to do it that way. So I made films of the pieces, the bouncing balls and others. Then we moved to New York, and it was harder to get film equipment. So I got the video-tape equipment, which is a lot more straightforward to work with". *Ibidem*, p. 243.

in the Corner, No. 1<sup>9</sup>, Bouncing Two Balls between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms<sup>10</sup>, Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square<sup>11</sup>, Stamping in the Studio<sup>12</sup>, and other works are recorded actions in which Nauman's body is used in a "meaningless" way: they intend no representation, suggestion or commentary; they are performed "for themselves". In order to emphasise it, the films are looped, which gets rid of any narrative impulses that might accidentally present themselves there.<sup>13</sup> Endless repetition voids the films of all meanings, since expectation – that structures a story in a specific (symbolic) way – is abolished. Moreover, the films are made in such a way that the body presented there is abstracted visually: the camera may be placed upside down or

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<sup>9</sup> "For this videotape, Nauman turned the camera sideways and positioned it so that his head is cropped from the frame and his body is presented from neck to ankles. As he stands in the corner, his back to the wall, he appears to be lying down; falling backwards into the corner and then pushing himself off the wall again, he appears to be trying to levitate himself [...]. As he performs these actions, his hands slam into the wall to break his falls, and the sounds become an integral part of the activities filmed". *Bruce Nauman*, ed. J. Simon..., p. 219. All the descriptions of Nauman's works come from the Catalogue Raisonné included there.

<sup>10</sup> "In this film Nauman bounces two balls in the center of a square marked by tape on the studio floor. He throws them as hard as he can, trying to maintain a specific pattern, but the balls ricochet out of control as his moves become correspondingly jumpy and unpredictable. [...] The sound and image are out of sync because he 'didn't have the equipment and patience' to coordinate them". *Bruce Nauman*, ed. J. Simon..., p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> "For this film, Nauman made a square of masking tape on the studio floor, with each side marked at its half point. To the sound of a metronome and beginning at one corner, he methodically moves around the perimeter of the square, sometimes facing into its interior, sometimes out. Each pace is the equivalent of half the length of a side of the taped square". *Ibidem*, p. 221.

<sup>12</sup> "For this work, Nauman pounds out rhythms with his feet that increase in complexity as he paces his studio, beginning with a steady one-two beat and advancing to a syncopated ten-beat phrase. As he stamps back and forth across the studio, he moves diagonally and in spirals. The camera is upside down, and the action is thus inverted in the frame [...]". *Ibidem*, p. 227.

<sup>13</sup> Robert C. Morgan, "Interview with Bruce Nauman", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 266.

on the side, there may be extreme close up involved (e.g. *Lip Sync*<sup>14</sup>), or extreme slow motion (e.g. *Gauze*<sup>15</sup>), or the framing may delete Nauman's head (the face as the most expressive human part) from the visible area (e.g. *Bouncing in the Corner*, Nos. 1 and 2). All of it adds to the "mental" abstraction of the body that signifies nothing and tells no story. The interesting moment is that, although we are dealing here with abstraction, this is not abstraction in the usual sense, whether geometrical or expressive, but extreme abstraction going hand in hand with extreme naturalistic representation (film and even more video are the most mimetic media) and in effect annulling each other. What is more, such seemingly pointless exercises, which nevertheless demand a lot of effort, might, in the final analysis, have some meaning to them, but a meaning (if one can call it that way) which is not of the representative or symbolic order at all. This is what Nauman has to say about them:

If you really believe in what you're doing and do it as well as you can, then there will be a certain amount of tension – if you are honestly getting tired, or if you are honestly trying to balance on one foot for a long time, there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response, they feel that foot and that tension.<sup>16</sup>

What we have here is a kind of identification, yet not the one which is the propelling force of mass culture (what draws the

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<sup>14</sup> "With the camera mounted upside down, framing only his mouth and neck, Nauman repeats the phrase 'lip sync' over and over in a loud whisper. Sound and image are intentionally unsynchronized, while the upside-down view of his lips and tongue in action provides a further disorienting quality to the work". Bruce Nauman, ed. J. Simon..., p. 233.

<sup>15</sup> "In this film, Nauman bit by bit, pulls five or six yards of gauze from his mouth. [...] [I]t is one of four 'Slo-Mo' films that he shot with an industrial high speed camera. The highly distended action is shown in extreme close-up, and was filmed with the camera placed upside down. The resulting inverted image causes Nauman's face to appear distorted". Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> W. Sharp, "Two Interviews" ..., p. 256.

audience "inside" a Hollywood film is identification with a character as a "person" and his or her "feelings", which involves symbolic representations of unrequited love, conquering masculinity, etc.), but some sort of "bodily togetherness" between a performer and the audience, which is not based on meaningful, symbolic representation – since the performer does not express his "interiority" here, the audience does not have anything to hold on to symbolically apart from the mere physical presence of his body, which is at the same time this particular personal body, yet devoid of all expressive power that would be able to assign some meaning to its tortuous actions.

The questions involved in this kind of work become even more radicalised when the activity to be performed is usually connected with some professional skill as, for instance, playing an instrument. Speaking about a film called *Violin Tuned D E A D* (ordinary tuning is G D A E), Nauman comments:

One thing I was interested in was playing [...] I wanted to set up a problem where it wouldn't matter whether I knew how to play the violin or not. What I did was to play as fast as I could on all four strings with the violin tuned D, E, A, D. I thought it would just be a lot of noise, but it turned out to be musically very interesting. It is a very tense piece.<sup>17</sup>

The question that comes to light here is the one of professionalism and dilettantism as well as the relation between them, and with it another one about the meaning of being an artist comes around too. Should an artist be a professional? A lot of them are, but does it really do the trick? After all, most of modern art has its roots in Dada, which tried to show that you do not have to be a professional to make art. But being a dilettante does not help much either, since what he looks for would be something personally pleasurable or interesting (which generally amounts to the same thing) for him, therefore meaningless actions, which demand a lot of effort, are not likely to be what he is up to. On the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.



other hand, what makes one a professional (e.g. a professional musician) is a technique one can fall back on, yet what is problematic here is that a technique, as all "mechanisms", always inserts the same preconceived clichéd solutions to encountered problems. Dilettantism involves narcissistic pleasure seeking, while professionalism's efficacy is generally based on the impersonal and technical approach. For that reason Nauman gets rid of both pleasure and efficacy in order that, first of all, a problem appears, and, secondly, that it is encountered **as a problem** (not just a technical obstacle) – if one does not have the needed technique or skills, one has to **struggle** within the region of which he knows **no rules**; so either one goes completely without them, or one has to make them up from scratch. This way the struggle becomes an exercise in endurance – the performance is both mentally and physically exhausting, one is groping around the territory of one's own body with no preconceived solutions. Nauman comments:

An awareness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity and you can't get it from just thinking about yourself. You do exercises, you have certain kinds of awareness that you don't have if you read books. So the films and some of the pieces that I did after that for videotapes were specifically about doing exercises in balance. I thought of them as dance problems without being a dancer, being interested in the kinds of tension that arise when you try to balance and can't.<sup>18</sup>

An activity that demands such groping, that is, non-narrativised, non-coded struggle makes one aware of oneself as one's body, but this kind of awareness has nothing to do with meaning. And the term "books" stands here not only for purely mental processes as reading, but also for all "ritualised", that is, narrative practices of the body, which have nothing to do with the awareness Nauman speaks about, as for instance, body-building or fitness, in which the body loses its material weight or mass completely,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 253.

and becomes utterly transformed by a given code of narration into a perfectly dematerialised sign (these are “meaningful” activities, which aim at being a perfect piece of the code, e.g. to look the right way). Yet, Nauman’s attempts seem to be only partially successful. In spite of all, the residue of the narcissistic element remains: what is presented as the site of art is the artist’s exposed body – and people die of exposure.

To avoid this, Nauman starts hiring performers in order to evacuate his own body from the work. It results in a new kind of situation, because the artist is not able to control the performance the way it was possible when he himself did it. Due to the new circumstances his work begins to change – if somebody else is performing, all accidentality and improvisation strongly present in earlier works (struggle with no rules), have to go. In order to avoid the dilution of the “precision” of his work by free rein allowed to the performer, the activities called for have to be simple (abstract) and the instructions have to be as clear as not to allow individual interpretation, by means of which self-expression of the performer would insinuate itself into the work. *Body as a Sphere* may serve here as an example:

Curl your body into the corner of a room. Imagine a point at the center of your body and concentrate on pulling your body in around that point. Then attempt to press that point down into the corner of the room. It should be clear that these are not intended as static positions which are to be held for an hour a day, but mental and physical activities or processes to be carried out. At the start, the performer may need to repeat the exercise several times in order to fill the hour, but at the end of ten days or so, he should be able to extend the execution to a full hour. The number of days required for an uninterrupted hour performance of course depends on the receptivity and training of the performer.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bruce Nauman, “Notes and Projects”, in: Bruce Nauman, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 319.

What is most interesting in such a performance is that, firstly, it is not really mental and physical activity, that is, exercises concerning separated spirit and body performed simultaneously, but that there is absolutely no difference here between the mental and physical exercise (mental *cum* physical) – their distinction becomes problematic and what makes it possible is precisely the erasure of expressive, that is, symbolic capacity which introduces such divisions. What is more, the status of such exercise as bodily one is quite paradoxical, because, although it is physical, the performer does not move at all. Yet, there is the exhaustion that the activity leads to, caused by a certain physical and mental tension. And “tension” is, as we have seen, a crucial word for Nauman.

In this context, an even more interesting example may be the instructions for the following performance:

- A. LIE DOWN ON THE FLOOR NEAR THE CENTER OF THE SPACE, FACE DOWN, AND SLOWLY ALLOW YOURSELF TO SINK DOWN INTO THE FLOOR. EYES OPEN.
- B. LIE ON YOUR BACK ON THE FLOOR NEAR THE CENTER OF THE SPACE AND SLOWLY ALLOW THE FLOOR TO RISE UP AROUND YOU. EYES OPEN.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The instructions continue:

This is a mental exercise. Practice each day for one hour 1/2 hour for A, then a sufficient break to clear the mind and body, then 1/2 hour practice B.

At first, as concentration and continuity are broken or allowed to stray every few seconds or minutes, simply start over and continue to repeat the exercise until 1/2 hour is used.

The problem is to try to make the exercise continuous and uninterrupted for the full 1/2 hour. That is, to take the full 1/2 hour to A sink under the floor, or B to allow the floor to rise completely over you.

In exercise A it helps to become aware of peripheral vision – use it to emphasise the space at the edges of the room and begin to sink below the edges and finally under the floor.

This work was performed and video-taped in 1973 as *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down* and *Elke Allowing the Floor to Rise Up over Her, Face Up*. What we see in the films is just the performers lying on the floor, but there is more that comes with it. This is what Nauman says about these works:

I was working on the exercise in the studio for a while and wanted to make a tape of it, a record, to see if you could see what was happening. When I did the things, they made me tired and I felt good when I finished, but they were not relaxing; they took a lot of energy and a lot of concentration and paying attention. [...] I thought it would be nice if somebody else could do it other than myself. [...] The problem was to make the exercise take up the full hour – which I had never been able to do. [...] It became extremely tense: the guy who was trying to sink into the floor started to choke, and almost got the dry heaves. I got pretty scared, and didn't know what to do. I didn't know if I should "wake him up" or what, or if he was kind of sleepwalking. I didn't know if he was physically ill, or if he was really gasping and choking. He finally sat up and kind of controlled himself, and we talked about it. The tape was running, but unfortunately the microphone did not pick it up, but I wish it had because it was really beautiful – he was really scared. He said, "I just tried to do it too fast, and I was afraid I couldn't get out". What had happened was that as his chest began to sink through the floor, it was filled up and he just couldn't breathe any more, so he started to... choke. [...] He said, "I was afraid to move my hand, because I thought if I moved it some of the molecules would stay there and I would lose it – it would come all apart and I couldn't get it out". Interestingly, the night before, the same thing happened to the girl in the other tape. She broke out into an incredible sweat, and she couldn't

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In B begin to deemphasise peripheral vision – become aware of tunnelling of vision – so that the edges of the space begin to fall away and the center rises up around you.

In each case use caution in releasing yourself at the end of the period of exercise.

Bruce Nauman, "Instructions", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., pp. 326–327.

breathe. It was pretty scary. It was, first of all, amazing that someone else could do this exercise, that they could even get into it. It was such an intense experience that it was really frightening for both of them to do. As nearly as I can tell, the tapes don't show any of that, which I thought was also interesting.<sup>21</sup>

The physical-mental tension as constituting the backbone of the work reappears, but what is equally interesting is the way the old questions are reinterpreted here – if the task of a sculptor is to alter matter, is Nauman's work sculptural? Because modelling matter is precisely what happens in them.<sup>22</sup>

But such works also involve a certain difficulty considering their aim. On the one hand, they are meaningless, in the sense of the lack of expression and representation, yet, on the other hand, they try to "say" something to the spectator or, to be more precise, one should rather say that they try to **do** something to him: what they say is what they do.<sup>23</sup> If this is expression, it is not expression in the mimetic sense at least. Yet, the position of the spectator of such works is rather awkward, because, if the work's message is what it does to you, you will never be sure what it really is until you become a performer ("sympathetic response" of the audience, which Nauman speaks about, is rather fragile) – and this is not likely with an ordinary member of the public. Therefore, a more efficient and less "identificatory" kind of work would be needed, one that involves the spectator straightforwardly without any mediation, regardless whether it is the artist himself – against whom the accusation of narcissism may always be raised – or a more "neutralised" performer.

In *Double Doors – Projection and Displacement*, it is the spectator who is invited to perform the mental-physical exercise set up

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<sup>21</sup> B. Nauman, in: Jan Butterfield, "Bruce Nauman: The Center of Yourself", *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 49, No. 6 (February 1975), pp. 53-54, quoted in: Paul Schimmel, "Pay Attention", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. J. Simon..., p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> P. Schimmel, "Pay Attention"..., p. 79.

<sup>23</sup> P. Schimmel, quoted in: Arthur C. Danto, "Bruce Nauman", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 147.

by Nauman in the gallery. "For this work, two parallel walls are built four feet apart, each with a doorway, one of which is slightly smaller. [...] The installation is accompanied by a text:

(Image Projection and Displacement) (No Promises) / Stand in the wedge that will allow you to see through the doors and into a further room. / Become aware of the volume displaced by your body. Imagine it filled with water or some gas (helium). / Concentrate fully on this volume as other considerations dissipate (heat, or cold, gravity). / It's not necessary to remain rigid or fixed in position. Form an image of yourself in the further room standing facing away. / Suppose you had just walked through the doors into that room. / Concentrate and try to feel the volume displaced by the image. / Walk through to the other and step into that volume - precisely that displaced image. / Pay attention to the placement of your extremities and those parts you cannot see: your fingers - the back of your neck - the small of your back. / Make your body fit your image".<sup>24</sup>

As I have tried to suggest, making one's body fit one's image was precisely the point of the activities Nauman invented for his performers, but now it is the spectator who is asked to perform. And it is really an ultimatum: either you do precisely what I tell you or the work will remain "silent". Slightly ironic emphasis on the attention that should be paid to the extremities and parts that one cannot see (this is not an exercise in visualisation) emphasises the conscious effort of erasing the difference between the mental image of one's body and its physical mass or volume. If it is achieved, the perfect matching results in meaningless, non-expressive, yet personal body, whereas any remaining rift allows for ever greater symbolisation-expression-representation governed by the rules of narcissism and convention (which, in this context, amount to the same: self-revelation is the aesthetic convention of the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

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<sup>24</sup> Bruce Nauman, ed. J. Simon..., p. 259.

As in cases of hired performers, the involvement of the spectator does not allow him to become "inventive" (as it happens in the works in which an artist provides the audience with certain raw materials and they are allowed to manipulate them freely).<sup>25</sup> This is quite understandable in our context, since free manipulation would automatically bring back the questions of expression of the manipulating subject and this is precisely the situation that Nauman's work is set to destroy. So audience participation is based either on a setting up of a situation described in **precise instructions**, as in the case of *Double Doors*, or by means of putting a spectator in a **constricting environment**, which allows only these reactions of the participant that the artist planned. The most familiar examples here are a series of Nauman's narrow corridors that a spectator is supposed to enter (of which the most interesting may be *Live-Taped Video Corridor*)<sup>26</sup>, as well as *Going Round the Corner Piece*<sup>27</sup>, and *Acoustic Wedge*

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<sup>25</sup> Nauman: "I mistrust audience participation. That's why I try to make these works as limiting as possible". W. Sharp, "Two Interviews"..., p. 235.

<sup>26</sup> "A video camera with wide-angle lens is mounted ten feet above the floor, just outside the opening of a long, narrow corridor. Two monitors are stacked on the floor at the far end of the corridor. The top one displays a live image from the closed-circuit video camera; the bottom one continuously plays a prerecorded videotape of the empty corridor from the same perspective. As the visitor walks deeper into the corridor, his or her image on the monitor (seen from above and behind) appears to move farther away and diminish in size, reflecting the viewer's actual movement away from the camera". Bruce Nauman, ed. J. Simon..., p. 247.

<sup>27</sup> "This work calls for a square room to be built with walls ten feet high and twenty feet long, painted white. At one corner of each exterior wall a television monitor sits on the floor, while high on the opposite side of each wall a television camera is mounted 111 inches [281.9 cm] above the floor. Each camera is angled downward to capture the image of a passing spectator and is connected by a cable to the monitor diagonally across from it. [...] [A]s one rounds the corner of the construction, the monitor at the end of the wall section ahead displays a momentary view of one's own back seeming to turn the next corner. The sensation is of chasing oneself from behind". Ibidem, p. 245.

(*Sound Wedge – Double Wedge*)<sup>28</sup>, which is also a corridor but a V-shaped one, padded with sound damping material, the effect of which is that, as you walk into it, the further you go the stronger pressure is caused on your ears and, as it affects also the rest of your body, you are subject to a kind of synesthetic experience in which you seem to feel the space with your ears (!).<sup>29</sup>

All of these works are very successful if we take into consideration Nauman's original predicament of being personal but avoiding self-exposure. Each of them is **personal**, because the situation which the spectator experiences is down to the smallest detail invented and arranged by the artist who makes it so constricted that the effects on the participant be only the ones that the artist wants him to experience (Nauman is the "origin" of what takes place). Yet, the work is to no extent expressive or self-revelatory, because the effect of the work does not allow you to identify with Nauman in any way. The "meaning" of the work is what it does to you, so it is set up to make you examine **your own** feelings and reactions (not the artist's) in the face of the situation.<sup>30</sup> And because of the lack of expressive meaning, which is the effect of erasure of the rift between the body and its image (that is, the body and mind) that allows for symbolisation and narration, what you experience in these works is very difficult to describe (there is no way to narrate it). What is more, although it is true what one of the critics said – that "you are asked to physicalize yourself in relation to the work"<sup>31</sup> – these works are also highly abstract, therefore their impact comes from an un-

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<sup>28</sup> "For this piece, four walls define two twenty-inch-wide corridors that are joined at one end to form a V-shaped space. The interiors of the corridors are faced with acoustic material; the outside of each is left unfinished. As the viewer inches sideways through the narrow corridors toward the structure's apex, sound is increasingly dampened". Ibidem, p. 240.

<sup>29</sup> W. Sharp, "Two Interviews" ..., p. 248.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Storr, "Flashing the Light in the Shadow of Doubt", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 159.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks Adams, "The Nauman Phenomenon", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 82.



sual co-occurrence: one experiences strong physical sensation in the presence of an abstract image or situation (as, for instance, in the wedge).

The works discussed above mainly use abstraction as the means of sensory deprivation and impoverishment with the intention to purify the work from the symbolic and expressive ideas of the body, self, art, etc., all of them based on the humanist narrative drive demanding "action" (a coded sequence in and of time), which it is very difficult to suspend. The major trend in Nauman's works until this moment had been to confound expectations, as another incarnation of narrativity (not to play with them, but to get rid of them), to destroy the impulse to get ahead of oneself by means of projecting the image. Both the urgency and risk involved in accomplishing that, as well as the extreme difficulty involved, are explicitly stated in Nauman's *Flayed Earth Flayed Self (Skin Sink)*, which consists of a very spare installation<sup>32</sup> with an accompanying text whose fragment reads:

[...] (everything will feel the / same and it will not have a new meaning THIS / DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING ANYWAY) but now there / is either a greater density or less density / and if you turn back (when you turn back) / the change will be all around you. Now you / cannot leave or walk away. Has to do with your / ability to give up your control over space. This / is difficult because nothing will happen - and / later you will be no better or worse off for it. / This is more than one should require of another / person. THIS IS FAR TOO PRIVATE AND DANGEROUS / BECAUSE THERE IS NO ELATION NO PAIN NO KNOWLEDGE / AN INCREDIBLE RISK WITH (BECAUSE) NOTHING IS / LOST OR GAINED NOTHING TO CATCH OUT OF THE / CORNER OF YOUR EYE - YOU MAY THINK YOU FELT SOME- / THING BUT THAT'S NOT IT THAT'S NOT ANYTHING / YOU'RE ONLY HERE IN THE

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<sup>32</sup> "Nauman used six lengths of masking tape that radiate from the center of the gallery floor in a pinwheel pattern and continue up the walls, dividing the room into six equal parts". Bruce Nauman, ed. J. Simon..., p. 260.

ROOM: / MY SECRET IS THAT I STAYED THE SAME FOR A SHORT TIME.<sup>33</sup>

Nothing could be more precise in describing what Nauman's work tries to accomplish. Nevertheless, some of the works of the 1960s and 70s have been given existentialist interpretation as they, in a sense, invite it – or should one rather say: the works make the critical (which is also narrative) automatism think twice and feel ill at ease? The works as *Live-Taped Video Corridor*, in which the spectator approaching his image simultaneously gets away from it, or *Going Around the Corner Piece*, where he sees himself only for a fleeting moment when he turns a corner – as if out of the corner of his eye – may produce interpretations concerned with the exposition of the true nature of the self etc., yet, I believe, the critic proposing them must feel very uncomfortable with himself, since they remain unconvincingly at odds with the "clinical" preciseness and abstraction the installations confront the spectator with. Nothing is stated out of the corner of one's eye: there is no hidden depth involved here into which our mind can plunge in search for some disembodied knowledge – everything is there exposed **on the surface** by means of a certain state of the body, achieved resorting to simple technique and all else is just the narrative weakness that wants to ablate that surface and create a symbolising-expressive rift which would pass for the image of spiritual depth.

*Flayed Earth* clearly states the necessity of a kind of experience which is difficult to achieve and which is too private and dangerous (cruel?), because it cannot be converted into a narration whether it be elation, pain or knowledge, an experience from which nothing is gained or lost, in which one only touches oneself, yet not as an individual "self" (self-identity is already a narration). This is the experience that cannot last, but which makes one touch one's limit, when the image and the body dissolve in each other opening one to the experience of time (and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

space) which is the experience of now (and here).<sup>34</sup> Yet, not the putative metaphysical experience of a timeless moment of presence above time given by means of spiritual insight that leaves the wretched body behind, but time and space as palpable stuff that constitutes one's body, "spaciotime" as the obscure undifferentiated mass that my body is made of. What takes place here is the ecstatic experience in its etymological sense of going beyond oneself, or, to be more precise, to be oneself at one's limit. We step into the realm of ecstatic art, which, against popular opinions, is not the lax art of abandonment and excessive subjectivity, but, as we have already seen, of preciseness and self-control. But as soon as we step into such territory, we step out of it.

*Flayed Earth Flayed Self* is a menacing title and, in a sense, it gestures towards matters of communal (ecological?) importance. This is not completely new in Nauman's work. His *Yellow Room (Triangular)* is a triangular space with a door to it, illuminated with yellow fluorescent light, which brings discomfort to everybody that enters it.<sup>35</sup> Don't the closed circuit industrial cameras used in *Video Corridor* or *Round the Corner* take us into the territory of surveillance, where what one does is closely observed by the powers not favourably disposed to any individual action? We may multiply such examples we have already dealt with as critical hubris of depth production that reduces experience to code. Yet, Nauman's "Catalogue Raisonne" shows that after the intensely abstract works of the middle 1970s, as *Forced Perspective I* (fifty-six rhomboid blocks arranged on the floor in a roughly rectangular space), and also quite abstract models for underground and outdoor spaces of the second part of the decade (another type of discomforting spaces as some-

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<sup>34</sup> See: Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. P. Connor, trans. P. Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>35</sup> B. Nauman wrote about it: "[...] the room is very hard to stay inside of - I can't stay very long myself". *Bruce Nauman*, ed. J. Simon..., p. 261.

times even the title indicates, e.g. *Model for Outdoor Piece: Depression*), his works become more and more engaged in commenting on contemporary culture and do it in an ever more straightforward way, gradually abandoning the abstract attitude so characteristic of his earlier works. The unmediated commentary starts with a series of chairs suspended in awkward positions more or less at the eye-level above the floor within the space limited by some geometric figure (e.g. *Diamond Africa with Chair Tuned D E A D*, *South America Circle*, *South America Triangle*), which refer to torture practices by different contemporary regimes. Yet, it was neon tubing – which he had used from the very beginning of his career – that would become Nauman's favourite medium in which he commented on his native culture (and so on mediated global culture in general, as it is almost entirely Americanised). His early neon signs, as we have seen, are either abstracted (*My Last Name...*) or – if they spell any message – quite benign, although ironic (*The True Artist...*). By the beginning of the 1980s, the abstraction and irony begins to leave such work. A kind of transitory moment can be seen in *Vices and Virtues*, where neon names of seven vices in italics are superimposed over seven virtues in roman, all of them in different bright colours, lighted in a complicated sequence that from time to time happens to illuminate both the virtue and the vice superimposed on it, which leads to all sorts of linguistic confusion: sometimes the word is unintelligible, sometimes a new word is created, or some old word can be elicited from the confusion of letters. For instance, the FAITH / LUST combination when lighted together can be read as FLAUTISH, or the word like FAUST can be elicited from such superimposition. Neon signs, being here the shorthand for the alluring mediated American mass culture of bright colours and simple messages with its black and white morality, get frustrated and keep throwing up confused or unintelligible messages-values, while the spectators, disentangling from the confusion words belonging to a clearly defined cultural past, pretend that everything is as it has always been and their meaning has not changed.

But *Vices and Virtues* is still relatively abstract, if compared with other works by Nauman that become more and more involved in the media and the language of American mass culture he sees around. It is not only colourful and simplified (typical features of neons), but also violent, loud, crude, rude, and, above all, obscene. The statements that begin to appear in his work are no longer mildly ironic as "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths", but are more in the line of "PAY ATTENTION MOTHERFUCKERS"<sup>36</sup> (with a sort of companion piece "PLEASE PAY ATTENTION PLEASE"), which quite convincingly sums up what has been going on in the global village for the last quarter of a century. A lot of neon works from the 1980s are constructed this way – they are extremely simplified, their message is very clear, but they are far from abstract or detached. They may take the form of superimposed short phrases (RUB IT ON / YOUR CHEST / STICK IT IN / YOUR EAR / MY FACE / AMERICAN / VIOLENCE) forming a kind of broken swastika, as in *American Violence*, or, as in *Sex and Death by Murder and Suicide*, of two human figures (female and male) engaging alternatively in killing each other (or themselves) and oral intercourse with a partner of the same sex.<sup>37</sup> Since these works are so basic and unadorned in their form, and so straightforwardly angry and obscene in their content, the reaction they elicit from the spectator is refusal (What is he trying to do to me?!), which is not aroused when, as it is usually the case in a standard Hollywood movie,

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<sup>36</sup> This work is not neon sign, but a lithograph.

<sup>37</sup> "In this work in red, orange, and pink neon animated by a complex electrical program, a male and female figure seen in outline stand facing each other. The figures gesture to each other, brandishing weapons (the woman holds a knife, the man a gun), and then turn the weapons on themselves. At one point in the program, seated and crouching figures are illuminated immediately in front of the standing figures (these new pairs forming same-sex couples) and engage in oral intercourse with them. As in other neon works of the same year, the eyes of the figures alternate between round forms and Xs [...], and the male figure's penis alternates between erection and limpness". Bruce Nauman, ed. J. Simon..., p. 298.

people alternately kill and fuck each other. Defamiliarisation of an omnipresent medium (neon sign saying: buy me, use me up, you won't regret it), by means of taking its message to extremes, might – for a moment – bring panic and therefore activate resistance.

The most sophisticated as well as the most famous work by Nauman in this direction is a video installation of 1987 entitled *Clown Torture*<sup>38</sup>, which returns to some typical motives and techniques of the artist, but which are used here to a radically different purpose. One of the things we have come across is the looping of all the films that we are shown: the clown is "forced" to repeat his tricks over and over again. Another familiar situation is surveillance (this time unashamed, in earlier works only implied) of the clown defecating in a public lavatory. The difference seems to be that it is the clown who is the protagonist of the work, not the spectator, or the artist. But is this the case?

For the first time the figure of a clown appears in Nauman's neon works in the middle of the 1980s, together with obscene sex

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<sup>38</sup> "For this video installation on three walls of a room, two smaller monitors (one upside down and one on its side) are mounted atop two larger monitors on pedestal bases set side by side against the far wall. Ceiling-mounted video projectors beam images onto the right and left flanking walls. The work's four separate videotapes are projected on the walls or displayed on the monitors simultaneously and continuously. One of the videotapes (projected onto the left wall) contains a single sequence entitled 'Clown Taking a Shit' (in which a clown is seen sitting on a toilet in a public restroom as if viewed by a surveillance camera). The other three videotapes (displayed on the four monitors and the right wall) contain the following segments, arranged in a different order on each: 'Clown with Goldfish' (a clown balances a fishbowl on a pole against the ceiling until he tires and falls); 'Clown with Water Bucket' (a clown walks through a door and is doused by a bucket of water rigged above); 'Pete and Repeat' (a clown becomes increasingly frustrated as he recounts the story 'Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence ...'); and 'No, No, No, No' (a clown shouts 'No' in various intonations). [...] Some of the images were recorded with the camera on its side; they thus appear vertical on the sideways monitor and horizontal on the upright monitors, adding to the general confusion of orientations and sounds". Ibidem, p. 297.

and violence (e.g. *Mean Clown Welcome*) and it obviously is not a coincidence. Nauman himself comments:

I got interested in the idea of the clown first of all because there is a mask, and it becomes an abstracted idea of a person. It's not anyone in particular, see, it's just an idea of a person. And for this reason, because clowns are abstract in some sense, they become very disconcerting.<sup>39</sup>

We have met with abstraction in relation to the human figure or its signs in the earlier work as a means of "purification" of a narrative element, but clown's abstraction is of completely different order. The abstraction that had to do with the artist's, performer's or spectator's body aimed – as I was trying to show – at the experience of one's body as something more than the image, as the productive force that experiences itself as it touches its limits and finds there the materiality of spirit. One may awkwardly call it materialist transcendence.

The clown is abstract because he is nobody in particular (he does not have a face), yet the situation is far more extreme than that, because he has **no body** either. Normal considerations for persons, as for instance compassion, do not apply to clowns, because all the degrading and painful things that usually happen to them on stage do not make them suffer. This way their physicality is erased and the public laughs rather than becomes horrified. But Nauman's point is to pervert that convention. On the one hand, he forces his clown into the body making him defecate in front of the public (symbolically, the most physical of acts), and at the same time, by means of infinite repetition of supposedly "funny" actions performed by the clown, he demonstrates how nonsensically cruel they are (one does not have to infer it – on one of the screens it is the clown himself who screams No! No! No!). Yet, the work is obviously not a comment on clowns. Being a kind of continuation of the violent and obscene

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<sup>39</sup> B. Nauman, in: Joan Simon, "Breaking the Silence", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 283.

neon figures of the 1980s, as well as the video performances of earlier years, it is not only frustrating, but itself the product of frustration. The wished-for ecstatic body disappeared from the horizon of culture (including art) and one can now see what double it left in its place – the abstracted body of the spectator experienced by means of the media. And whether we see here the image of a mass culture hero (the artist) or of his fan makes no difference whatsoever, because both of them have their meaning only as **consumers** (an idol is important for a fan only as the image representing the fan's inflated powers to consume). It is the consumer who is nobody in particular (ads speak to all) and whose body is only a simplified stick figure body fit for everybody. Abstracting process is strictly reversed here: it no longer means purification from narratives, but exactly its opposite, purification of all but narratives – there is a model for my body and the means of using it, which is produced for me as my desire. In the figurative neon signs, excellently trained abstract (reduced) bodies perform mechanised activities answering to the incentive which is at the same time the command: "Don't be the subject of your desires, just satisfy them, right now".<sup>40</sup> A stick figure is trained to have an erection when shown specific rudimentary signs, and since these few signs keep flashing everywhere, there is no time to lose. While in the earlier works by Nauman, withdrawal of information (deprivation) and abstraction led to a certain mental and sensory opening which we called ecstasy (overload), one can say that in a mediatised world deprivation (simplification) is the effect of the overload of one type of simple information. It is true that everybody becomes an expert in the world of series – an event Benjamin applauded in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* – but what he did not see was that its source is serial production of desire models, with which his project of a research into the social unconscious ceases to make any sense – serially produced desire is in no

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<sup>40</sup> Jean-Charles Masséra, "Dance with the Law", in: *Bruce Nauman*, ed. R.C. Morgan..., p. 178.



position to be repressed, because within the limits of the media everything is possible and anything that is produced can be immediately satisfied with no apparent consequences.

There are consequences, however, although they may not be apparent. While in Nauman's neons the mediatic desire and its satisfaction are merely shown as crude and mechanised, *Clown Torture* presents us with a certain forced haemorrhage from the mediatic vessel. As in the media the looked at is a perfect image of the onlooker, so they constitute a perfect and self-sufficient system of mirrors (the one on the screen is interesting for the one watching just because he is on the screen, and the relation of adulation is perfectly empty in content – being in his place would automatically make the onlooker interesting), the repeated “entertainment” performed by the clown is not only juxtaposed with (and so compared to) something as “distasteful” as defecation (not the process itself but being witness to it), but the clown himself, as if a part of him escaped from the self-mirroring machine, comments on what he goes through, screaming No! No! No! What he finally perceives is that the repetitive mechanised entertainment, in fact, constitutes torture and, what is more, one bound to be repeated infinitely with no hope of abating, because it is no longer recognised as torture by the serially produced empty subject of desires. The stick body of the consumer has finally been gloriously and completely emancipated<sup>41</sup> and with it what passes for consumer experience. (Nauman's work comments: there is no more human sexual experience, only *Human Sexual Experience*.<sup>42</sup>) Yet, the emancipation that takes place here is the one from the ecstatic body – which is the only site of experience that does not reproduce any codes, but which is the source for them – into the repetitive image of mass produced mechanised stick figure that is fed into the mediatic machine of reproduction

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 175.

<sup>42</sup> “In this animated neon work, the pointer finger of a blue hand moves in and out of the circle formed by the thumb and pointer finger of a yellow hand, which also moves back and forth”. Bruce Nauman, ed. J. Simon..., p. 296.

and circulates there with no respite. What Baudrillard called ecstasy is actually torture.<sup>43</sup>

What makes *Clown Torture* even more interesting (or inevitable?) is that, to a large extent, it works by means of mirroring the mechanism it tries to expose. The flood of information provided by the four separate repetitive "stories" replete with screaming and crashing sounds (apart from a rather quiet *Clown Taking a Shit*) leads to a kind of overload of the accommodative abilities of the spectator, which results either in immediate refusal to watch it further ("what is he trying to do to me" reaction again), that is, resistance, or to a state of horrified petrification in the face of its dumb circularity. However, such "transport" does not take place in the "aesthetic" state of detachment – the work is far too violent, rude and noisy for mastering the confusion the spectator is subjected to and its experience becomes **excruciating**. In this sense, the clown torture unexpectedly turns out to be the **spectator's** torture. Yet it is the clown who screams "No! No! No!" So where are we? Who is mirroring whom? Who is the clown? Whence comes the torture? And how can it stop?

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<sup>43</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988).